Dietary advice to customers of a retail pharmacy store

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Background

Nutrition and health are well-known to be related. A poor diet and nutrition were identified by the Health of the Nation White Paper (Department of Health, 1992) as risk factors for coronary heart disease and some types of cancer.

Advice to individuals on diet has been traditionally given by state-registered dietitians. They are trained in the science of nutrition and the impact this has on health and also upon various medical conditions and illnesses. Thus there are two main aspects to the role:

- Preventive, health promoting – whereby advice is given to individuals or groups to promote a diet which prevents disorders such as coronary heart disease, cancers, etc.

- Therapeutic – whereby advice upon dietary modification is given to those with disorders such as diabetes mellitus, irritable bowel syndrome, etc. Indeed, for some disorders such as coeliac disease and some with Type 2 diabetes dietary modification may be the only treatment required.

People requiring therapeutic dietary advice are usually seen by a dietitian at NHS venues of hospitals (both as in-patients and out-patients), GP surgeries and health centres and specialist clinics such as at diabetes centres.

While advice on the preventive aspects of diet has also been provided by dietitians to groups and individuals at numerous venues including at schools, workplaces and in supermarkets, there are no records in the literature of the use of pharmacies as venues for the provision of such advice.

Methods

The pharmacy staff of Superdrug undertook an initiative to promote awareness of cancer at their stores, in the Midlands during a five-week period during October and November 1999.

A preliminary meeting of pharmacy staff took place in May 1999 to discuss all factors affecting the development of cancer and plan the event.

The author wishes to thank David Clark and the pharmacists of Superdrug who spearheaded this initiative.
At this meeting a presentation of diet and cancer was given based on the findings of the report on Nutritional Aspects of the Development of Cancer (Department of Health, 1998).

The pharmacy staff decided to employ a state-registered dietitian to provide advice in their stores to customers, who were concerned to help prevent the development of cancer, by eating a suitable diet. This dietary information, was to form part of the five-week programme on the prevention of cancer, which also included smoking cessation, BMI measurements, complementary therapies and breast care.

A state-registered dietitian was employed on a part-time basis to provide the advice and was briefed on the event. Suitable leaflets on nutritional advice to promote health were obtained by the dietitian. This selection focused on leaflets and posters using the “Balance of good health” which is the food guide promoted for nutritional education nationally and is produced by the Health Education Authority (1994).

Owing to the benefits to the diet of fruit and vegetable consumption, leaflets promoting their inclusion in the diet, such as are used by the “Take 5 campaign” of the British Dietetic Association (1998/1999), were also used.

The events, which were held in five different Superdrug stores in the Midlands, were promoted by posters in the store and local media coverage, as well as information from the pharmacists to customers.

Prior to the event the pharmacy staff also held full discussions, with local agencies such as the various Health Authorities which covered the geographical area of the promotions. They were asked to assist, if possible, and release NHS staff such as breast care nurses to take part in the event, and also promote the events to patients visiting NHS premises.

On the first day of the campaign a media personality was used to launch the event in each store and attract further press, radio and TV coverage.

Results

Any information that the dietitian was able to give was only general and of a preventive nature. Those individuals requiring more detailed therapeutic dietary advice on their individual medical condition were advised to contact their GP for referral to a local dietitian.

A total of 271 people were seen, with 106 being given general advice on “healthy eating” and the rest specific advice on a range of topics, e.g. fibre in the diet, feeding children, general information regarding diabetic diets, obesity management, weaning, sports nutrition, etc.

A wide range of advice was required and not just that focused on diet and cancer, as was the original aim of the event. People were very grateful for the assistance and information as to where to obtain more specific guidance.

Considerable dietetic time needed to be invested prior to the event with organisational details, including obtaining leaflets and materials for visitors as well as researching information after the event to send to individuals with more specific enquiries on an aspect of nutrition. While originally the material obtained dealt with a healthy diet, it became apparent from the enquiries that there were all types of requirements for information. Therefore, additional leaflets upon such topics as infant feeding, weight loss and numerous other areas were required.

The dietitian also received approaches from teachers, lecturers and students for material on nutrition. This was researched, material obtained and then sent to the schools, colleges, care homes for the elderly, playgroups and individual students.

There was a street fair in one town when the event occurred which meant the general number of shoppers in the town was reduced. However, nine women from the fair came for specific advice on feeding babies and children as well as two more for information on weight loss. All expressed gratitude at being able to access this information as normally they did not receive any due to constantly moving around the country.

While the event was targeted at diet to prevent cancer only four individuals came to request information on this particular aspect.

Although input was provided on various days, Saturdays were the busiest days for requests for information at all of the stores visited. Additionally it was noted that bad weather adversely affected the number of visitors requesting advice.

Discussion

There is considerable confusion in the mind of the public about a healthy diet with
43 per cent of men and 36 per cent of women being unsure (Office of Population Census and Surveys and Health Education Authority, 1995).

Supermarkets have already been shown to be potent and effective settings as venues for encouraging healthier eating (Roe et al., 1994).

Health promotion in the workplace has had a variety of impacts but may be regarded by some as a problem area as they may raise questions as to hidden agendas of employers (Chapman Walsh, 1988).

Pharmaceutical stores may be regarded by those who visit them to obtain prescriptions as a source of expertise. As shown by this initiative, expanding this expertise to also embrace the area of food and nutrition provided a means of easy access and advice to the public and one which merits considerable further investigation.

Conclusions

Collaborative initiatives such as this one held in retail pharmaceutical stores were shown to provide an easily accessible venue for the local population to discuss nutrition and diet. It is recommended that in the future a range of such events should be carried out and more fully evaluated.

References